IHX
I11-977
~~19~~ 72

WITCHCRAFT IN ILLINOIS

JOHN H. GUNN

Witchcraft in Illinois

John H. Gunn

Prepared by the Staff of the
Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County
1955

One of a historical series, this pamphlet is published under the direction of the governing Boards of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE SCHOOL CITY OF FORT WAYNE

W. Page Yarnelle, Treasurer

Joseph E. Kramer, Secretary

B.F. Geyer, President

Mrs. Sadie Fulk Roehrs

Willard Shambaugh

PUBLIC LIBRARY BOARD FOR ALLEN COUNTY

The members of this Board include the members of the Board of Trustees of the School City of Fort Wayne (with the same officers) together with the following citizens chosen from Allen County outside the corporate City of Fort Wayne

James E. Graham

Mrs. Glenn Henderson

Mrs. Charles Reynolds

33.4
795W
cop.2

FOREWORD

The following publication originally appeared in the MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN HISTORY, volume 14, November, 1885. The article was signed by John H. Gunn and is reprinted verbatim.

The Boards and the Staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County present this account in the hope that it will be interesting and informative to Library patrons.

ILLINOIS HISTORY
UIUC
LIBRARY
LINCOLN COLLECTIONS

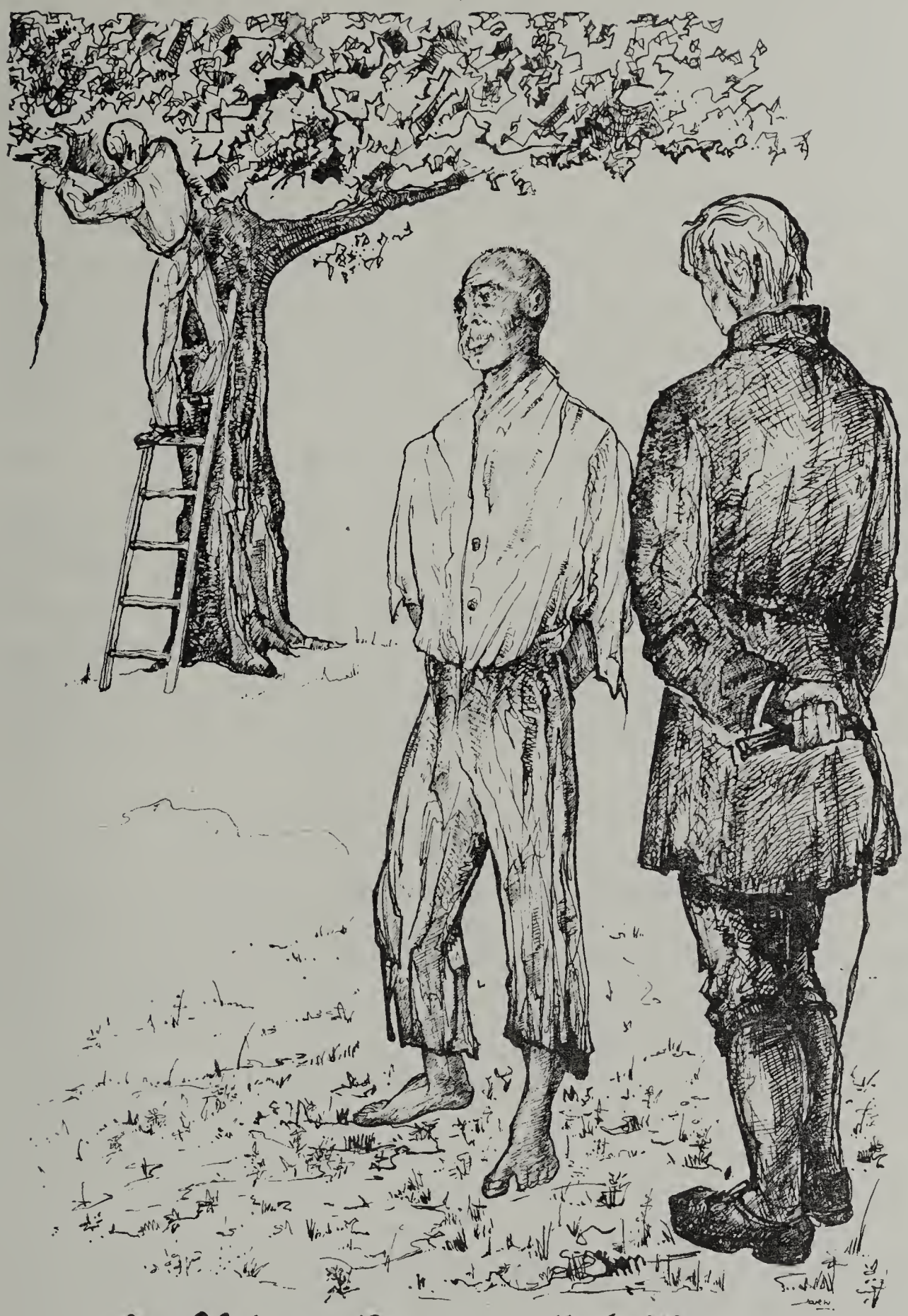
It will perhaps occasion no little surprise to the casual reader, and prove an unexpected revelation to those familiar with the general facts of Western history, to learn that capital punishment for the supposititious crime of witchcraft has occurred within the limits of the present State of Illinois, and almost within the memory of persons yet living. That a veritable Salem existed in the old capital town of Kaskaskia, almost one hundred years after the doctrine of witchcraft had been exploded in all other parts of the civilized world, is nothing which we need feel particularly proud of, but as an historical truth, which goes far to explain the character and habits of the early settlers of our prairie State, it is worthy of critical attention; none the less so since the light of criticism and the investigation of modern scientific thought is turning over and giving a new setting to many of the well accepted, but often poorly accredited myths of history.

The writer of this, born and bred within a day's journey of Old Fort Chartres, in boyhood often heard the story of the burning of the witch at "old Kaskia." Such executions had not yet become a part of veritable history, and were then given with other weird and wild stories of the French and Indians for winter-night entertainment, at the cabin fire of the early American settler to the east of the old French villages of Kaskaskia and Cahokia. A few of the old French romances have been preserved to posterity with the even wilder Indian legends, in the poetical form of Honorable James Hall, the pioneer venturer on the untried sea of Western literature, and are accessible to-day to the curious reader in the *Legends of the West*. These executions escaped the attention of Mr. Hall, however. No serious account was ever published of the witchcraft delusions until 1852, when ex-Governor John Reynolds wrote a little work entitled *The Pioneer History of Illinois*. This book refers to Illinois witchcraft in the following manner: "In Cahokia, about the year 1790, this superstition (the belief in necromancy or witchcraft) got the upper-hand of reason, and several poor African slaves were immolated at the shrine of ignorance for the imaginary offense. An African negro called Moreau was hung for witchcraft on a tree not far south-east of Cahokia. It is stated that he had said 'he poisoned his master, but his mistress was too strong for his necromancy.' Another slave, Emanuel, was shot in Cahokia for this crime,

and an old woman, Janette, was supposed to have the power to destroy persons and property by her incantations; many grown persons and all the children were terrified at her approach." * The old governor quaintly adds, as if in the abundance of his caution: "All countries have had their *witches*, and I hope Illinois will never again return to such scenes of bloodshed to appease the demon of ignorance." As the period at which these executions actually occurred was more than ten years prior to the date stated by Governor Reynolds, and during the most obscure period of our early history, no record had up to this time been made of the matter in any other publication, so far as is now known. Brown, whose *History of Illinois* was published in 1844, seems never to have heard of the witchcraft trials. Neither Perkins nor John M. Peck in the two earlier editions of *Annals of the West* make any mention of the matter. It is entirely unlikely that Peck, who was well acquainted with that section of the country, had ever heard of the occurrence, or it would have appeared in some shape in some of his many publications covering the local history of that part of the State. Even Governor Reynolds' statement was variously accepted. People in the older settled portions of Illinois, particularly in his own city and district, to some of whom the legend had been known before its publication, received it as genuine historical fact, while many questioned the truth of the occurrence, and more than one unfriendly critic pronounced it "an old-wife's fable;" and no doubt the publication of this matter, with some others, equally true, but equally doubted, led to the serious question of Governor Reynolds' veracity as a local historian. It was left, however, to modern research to sustain the historical accuracy of the occurrences mentioned by Reynolds on the strength of tradition, and by undisputed historical records bearing proof not only of the execution, but of the previous trial and conviction, under the forms of the law at least, of these the latest victims of a cruel superstition sacrificed within the limits of a Christian land.

To Mr. E. G. Mason, of Chicago, is the credit due for bringing out from obscurity the truth published first in a lecture before the Chicago Historical Society (February 15, 1881), and secondly, in a printed pamphlet (Fergus' "Historical Series, Number 12") of Colonel John Todd's *Record Book*. This book, furnished by Governor Patrick Henry, of the Commonwealth of Virginia, and sent by him to his appointee and subordinate, Colonel John Todd, Lieutenant-Commandant of the County of Illinois—a part of that commonwealth—contained in its first pages the "instructions," under which the newly appointed official was to administer and carry out the laws

* Reynolds' *Pioneer History*, page 143.



An African Negro called Moreau

of Virginia in the newly acquired territory which the valor of General George Rogers Clark and the Virginia militia under his command had recently so successfully wrested from the control of the English Government, and added to the territory of the "Old Dominion."

Many curious and important entries occur in this old *Record Book*, which contains the official record of the whole of Governor Todd's administration as county lieutenant, from his appointment in December, 1778, or, more properly, beginning with his landing in Kaskaskia the May following, and ending with his unfortunate death at the Battle of Blue Licks, in Kentucky, August 18, 1782. Not only are all of his official acts entered, but those of his subordinate, and for a time successor, Timothy de Munbrunt, a French gentleman of Kaskaskia. Many of the entries are of rich historical interest, and the publication by Mr. Mason of his lecture, in the cheap form of the Fergus series, places the contents of the *Record Book* within the reach of all, and relieves the priceless original, now the property of the Chicago Historical Society, from the handling of the curious.

This society, which has rescued much valuable historical matter from destruction, and placed it under careful and intelligent custody, found the Todd *Record*, amongst other papers sent it by the board of county commissioners of Randolph County, and through one of its most painstaking and intelligent members has thus given an account of it to the world. But to return to the subject of witchcraft, quoting from the Fergus publication,* we find:

"Illinois to wit

To Richard Winston Esq.,

Sheriff in chief of the District of Kaskaskia Negro Manuel a Slave, in your custody is condemned by the Court of Kaskaskia, after having made honorable fine at the door of the church, to be chained to a post at the water side, and then to be burnt alive, and his ashes scattered, as appears to me by record. This sentence you are hereby required to put in execution, on tuesday next at 9 o'clock in the morning, and this shall be your warrant.

Given under my hand and seal at Kaskaskia the 13th day of June, in the 3rd year of the commonwealth."

On this page of the *Record*, which appears to have been a copy of the death-warrant of the slave, who is no doubt the same designated in Reynolds' history as "Emanuel," there are heavy lines drawn across, as if to efface the writing; was the sentence changed to the more merciful death by

* Fergus' "Historical Series, Number 12," page 58.

shooting, administered by Captain Nicholas Janis and his militia company, as Reynolds states? or was it carried out in all the barbaric particularity of the given warrant, and the ashes of the victim swept from among the links of the scorched and blackened chain, "scattered" from the "water side" over the muddy waters of the Kaskaskia River, to accompany them in their vexed and turbulent journey down the boiling Mississippi to the Gulf?

On the next page of the *Record Book* is the following order:

"To Capt. Nicholas Janis.

You are hereby required to call upon a party of your militia to guard Moreau, a slave condemned to execution, up to the town of Kohos. Put them under an officer. They shall be entitled to pay rashtions and refreshment during the time they shall be upon duty to be certifyed hereafter by you

I am sir your hble servant

"I recommend 4 or 5 from your comp'y and as many from Capt. Placey and consult Mr. Lacroix about the time necessary J. T."

Jno. Todd

15th June 1779."

This Captain Janis is shown in another place to have been commissioned as captain of the "first company" of the Kaskaskia militia, which corps was commanded in its entirety by Captain Richard Winston, otherwise sheriff, who bore the rank of "Deputy Commandant." Nicholas Janis was also one of the judges of the court of Kaskaskia, as was also Charles Charleville, the 2d Lieutenant of his militia company, while five of the seven judges of the Cahokia court held commissions in the militia. The Mr. La Croix mentioned in the postscript, was, as Mr. Mason suggests, Mr. J. B. Le Croix, the first sheriff of the Cahokia (Cohos) district, by whom, no doubt, the sentence was duly and properly executed. Mr. Mason says: "These two entries, therefore, confirm Reynolds' account of this matter, the accuracy of which has sometimes been questioned."

There, however, the connection of the historian as a plain recorder of facts would seem to end. But the quaint and half-apologetic advice of Governor Reynolds suggests another interesting train of thought. "All countries have had their *witches*," and in many countries the crime or supposed crime of witchcraft was visited with heavy and bloody penalties. These Africans were duly condemned by organized courts of the State of Virginia. Presumably under her laws, did Virginia have witches, and laws for their punishment? If so, were these laws then in force? In other words, we propose to follow the inquiry as to the legal authority under which these men were executed.

By the first section of the act of the Virginia Assembly under which the "County of Illinois" was organized, enacted in October, 1778, it was, among other things, provided,

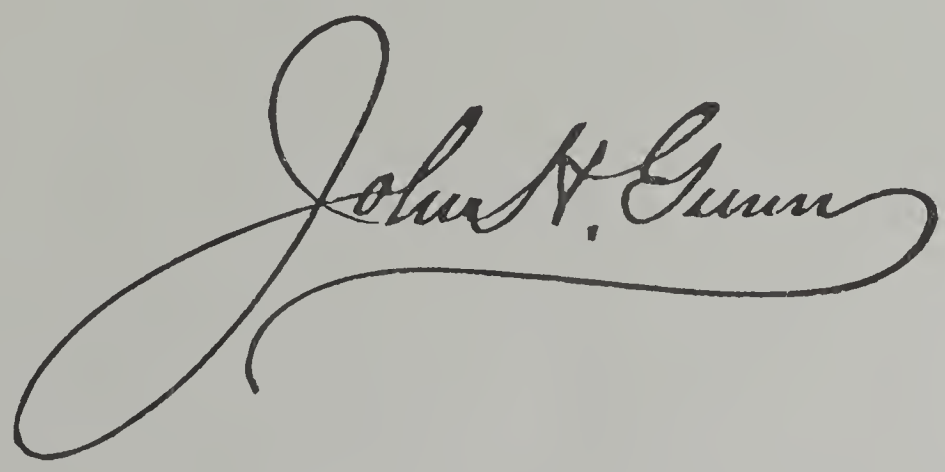
"And all civil officers to which the said inhabitants have been accustomed, necessary for the preservation of peace and the administration of justice, shall be chosen by a majority of the citizens in their respective districts, to be convened for that purpose by the County Lieutenant or Commandant, or his deputy, and shall be commissioned by the said County Lieutenant or Commandant in Chief, and be paid for their services in the same manner as such expenses have been heretofore borne levied and paid in that county; which said civil officers after taking the oath as before prescribed, shall exercise their several jurisdictions, and conduct themselves agreeable to the laws, which the present settlers are now accustomed to, And on any criminal prosecution, where the offender shall be adjudged guilty, it shall and may be lawful for the County Lieutenant or Commandant in Chief to pardon his or her offense, except in cases of murder or treason; and in such cases, he may respite execution from time to time until the sense of the governor in the first instance, and of the General Assembly, in case of treason, is obtained." (*Hening's Stat. at Large of Virginia. Vol. ix. p.* 552.)

Thus was continued under the new arrangement not only the old officials but the old laws. Prior to the conquest of the Illinois country in July, 1778, it had been under the dominion of the British Government, whose last governor, the mild Frenchman, M. de Rocheblave, had, by common consent, succeeded his predecessor, an English officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Wilkins, who had abandoned a government which was not only distasteful to him, but a climate which did not agree with him, several years before. Under Colonel Wilkins, civil courts were established in December, 1768, the common law of England, modified by the laws and customs of the French settlers, was the recognized rule of action. Since the acquisition of the Louisiana territory by the treaty of Paris in 1763, the British Government had pursued a conciliatory policy toward the French inhabitants, and the treaty provisions preserving to them their laws and customs were strictly adhered to. Governor Reynolds in his *Pioneer History* (page 115) says: "The government was very imperfect, but the people needed but little or none, there was a kind of a mixture of the civil and English law in the country, administered by the courts down to the year 1790. When Governor St. Clair came to Kaskaskia and set in motion the territorial government."

Such was the condition of affairs at the date these trials took place. The court consisted of a bench of seven justices, elected from the body of the French population, with but little knowledge of law of any kind, and no acquaintance whatever with the English common law. Had the defendants been English or Americans, they might, and doubtless would

have insisted on a jury trial, and the conviction, if any was had, would have been under the strict forms of the common law, extended by general enactment of the assembly over the whole State of Virginia. Had they been Frenchmen even, their conviction would hardly have been probable, as the Bull "Summis desiderantos" of Innocent VIII. enunciated in 1484, and under whose cruel provisions thousands had met a cruel and bloody death, had not been enforced in France after about the middle of the seventeenth century. In England no legalized executions had occurred since 1716. Even as early as 1751, the leader of a mob, which executed a reputed witch in Staffordshire, was tried and executed for murder.

In France no execution for witchcraft had occurred for over a century. But the priesthood of the French colony of Louisiana, was like its people —the customs, habits, fashions, and even ideas of the preceding century were still in force with all the authority of law.

But why should Governor Todd allow the executions to be carried out if the law did not justify the conviction? The victims were slaves, the property of the prosecutors, they were condemned by popular clamor, and their execution demanded by their own people, their owners, their guilt unquestioned by all who knew them, even their fellow slaves.

It was not to be expected of him, a stranger to the people and their customs, to long combat their desires as to the punishment of those whom custom and even the high authority of his own Church had ranked as heathen brutes, unworthy of a moment's consideration. The humanity of the Virginia gentleman, it is to be hoped, asserted itself, however, in the case of Manuel, and the sentence prepared with all the particularity of horrible detail by the French clerk of the Kaskia court, and which was evidently intended for his signature, yet does not bear it, was changed for the milder punishment, as administered by the detachment from the militia company, after they had been properly "refreshed" at the expense of the commonwealth.